

Subtle Tragedies

LSE's Wale Lawal explores the lack of options that face Nigerian voters in the 2015 democratic elections.

We do not just carry on. We wait. We wonder how we got here, first...

Two weeks ago, there was a shooting incident on the Lekki-Ikoyi Bridge, the details of which have not been fully clarified, except that three lives were lost. According to the Governor of Lagos, the security deficit that allowed the shooting to go unchecked was due to the President of Nigeria's planned visit to the city. Like many people, I received news of the incident as it was happening, our sources being people who, themselves, had fled from the bridge and had taken to the Internet to send rapid warnings. Nowadays, when tragedy occurs, it is uncomfortably natural for information channels to quickly become overrun by commentary, and for actual information to be crowded out. It is also in this manner that the culture of instantaneity embedded in modern communication even denies people those tender moments, which follow tragic incidents. Moments, which, until now it seems, had been designated periods of grieving and reflection; periods for the exchange of sympathy and affirmation of collective humaneness.



On this day in particular, as the news filtered into my Twitter feed, I also observed numerous comments in the spirit of “Is this what Lagosians are shouting about? As if this is not what people in Maiduguri experience every day.” Insensitive comments aimed at pitting two already heavily politicised regions of Nigeria against each other, in order to arrive at some unknown but ultimately insidious end. I responded in the following thread of tweets:



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What is the point of comparing the shooting today in Lekki to Maiduguri? The point of comparing two things that shouldn't be

happening?

8:07 PM - 12 Mar 2015

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12 Mar 15

"Now people in Lekki know what the people in Maiduguri have been going through." - have you listened to yourself?



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Such statements make it seem like one casualty is more "excusable" than the other. It is excusable in Lagos because it happens in Borno. No.

8:11 PM - 12 Mar 2015

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That is not how you solve the problem: by sentimentalising it as some perverse form of tit for tat/retributive justice.



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The hardworking civilians in Lagos are not responsible for what happens in Borno to hardworking civilians. They are not the villains here.

8:15 PM - 12 Mar 2015

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If only we would stop regionalising threats to "national" security. What happened in Lagos or happens in Borno is a "Nigerian" issue.



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So I don't see why we shouldn't sympathise and actively call for measures to be taken in Lagos as we have been doing about Borno.

8:27 PM - 12 Mar 2015

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You should ask yourself why you think people have to go through what is happening in Maiduguri.



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You should ask yourself why you think Nigeria needs 36 Maiduguris before all its citizens are "allowed" feel threatened.

8:37 PM - 12 Mar 2015

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What troubled me, in particular, was the feeling one got while reading the Lagos-Borno comparisons: antipathy towards not villains but the victims, unsuspecting citizens; the notion that violence having been normalised in one part of the country not only justifies but also warrants its introduction into another. The regionalisation of national issues is only one of the legacies of colonial governance that Nigerians still take it upon each other to perpetuate whenever deemed necessary. One thinks of colonial governance in the way Nigeria experienced it (indirect rule) as skeletal, and of its present vestige, like a long-dead-dinosaur's rib cage in a desert (as in the old cartoons); not really able to encase or enclose its subjects completely, and thus, requiring the internal division of its subjects to ensure the stability of the cage. Hence, what this internal division does is prevent collective thinking or action among the subjects – in this case, the citizens: us. What surprises, are the numerous active lines of division (Religion, Ethnicity, Location etc.) that are still pulsing in the country today: that inner penchant for Divide and Conquer.

To make matters worse, the Lekki-Ikoyi Bridge shooting incident was quickly politicised. The shooting had occurred during the heat of the presidential electoral campaigns, and Governor of Lagos (APC)'s alleged accusation against the President (PDP) polarised citizens even further. Yet somehow, in all this, the government has escaped criticism from its citizens. One wonders why the president's visit to any state should leave the state in disarray, just as one wonders whether the immediate aftermath of a tragic incident is the appropriate time for a respected governor to apportion blame about a persistent issue he long ought to have exerted leadership by dealing with.

I am not at all comfortable with the way Nigerians are led; more recently, the electoral campaigns have been a source of jarring discomfort. People will indeed turn up to the polling stations, but I have long abandoned any expectations of subsequent change or real leadership. Throughout the build-up to the 2015 Nigerian elections, I have grappled with deciding what party/candidate to support, no matter how many times I have been asked. Nigeria's political arena is so densely surrounded by fog, the kind that particularly shrouds ideological stance and handicaps any form of critical interest. Essentially, one has to be in the arena *gan-gan* to truly know what is happening. Otherwise, there are no discernible political or economic leanings, only swing-about and theatrics at which the citizenry must marvel from afar. Madness. Perhaps. Entertainment. Perhaps still. Yet even those privileged to watch from atop the fences will testify that the Nigerian political fence is just like any other fence in the country: the privilege to sit on it – with its barbed wires and serried ranks of spikes and shards of glass – is its own punishment.


It is an extremely uncomfortable position to be in: I am interested in the politics, deeply so, have followed it neck to jaw, but I do not consider myself on the fence. Rather, something worse: angry, disappointed, frightened and confused. I consider myself full of questions that neither of the major parties has managed to answer even after months of their rampant show and tell. Through this

period, we have watched politicians trade political parties – institutions they would so readily claim have long-established, legitimate ideologies – whimsically, like sim-cards, and the political arena and its crude instruments of politicking have largely remained the same. Throughout the elections, we have witnessed the commodification of antipathy, and its widespread distribution through even trusted newspapers. We have stood by and watched religion and ethnicity get dragged into the mire. We have endured the infantilisation of youth matters. In this area, the young people of Nigeria have been nothing short of poorly represented and insulted. We have watched the blatant politicisation of the missing girls and the security crisis in Nigeria. Between what has been said and not said about the missing girls and the ongoing kidnappings and killings in our country, our humanity has suffered a great descent. Most troubling of all, we have suffered disappointment watching a party of veteran politicians that dares call itself new or different, rise up to challenge the incumbent by using the same appalling and abusive political instruments. In fact, the greatest disappointment of these elections has been watching the opposition shy away from the opportunity to truly represent change and strong leadership, out of what can at best be described as laziness.

Surely, each and every one of us must have questions. Are the major parties even distinguishable? Is anyone truly convinced by these parties? Do their proposed plans and policies hold weight or will we just be voting “for the sake of democracy”? I have endured this hackneyed argument: that if one wants to affirm democracy one must vote the opposition. I’m afraid that while I have great reservations about the incumbent party, and am indeed desperate like anybody else for positive change, I do not agree with this argument and consider it a sinister attempt at bullying. What makes democracy compelling and ours additionally frustrating is the fact that however people vote during the elections will still perpetuate our democracy, including voting for the incumbent party and even not voting at all.

Whatever happens after today, however, I fear will also contain an element of sour tragedy. There is no doubt that our options are not the ideal representations of us and that the bodies that surround them will only quicken the pace at which they will eventually disappoint us. Nothing new has been said here, as there are many who plan to vote solely as an act of sacrifice. There are many who will be offering their votes and gutting the next four years over the altar of democracy, in hopes that during the next round of elections something good will turn up. But a lot can worsen in four years. Whichever way one looks at it, PDP, APC, somehow, we’ve been trapped.

All that we have experienced, so far, ought to be enough to push us to start thinking critically about our country; about these people we are always force-fed as our leaders, the political industry in which our leaders are manufactured, and how readily prepared our leaders always are to polarise their citizens; to stifle collective thought; to evade their responsibilities. We need to ask ourselves how we came to elect as president a man whose track record should have indicated that it is not enough to have good or humble intentions to lead Nigeria. He is, in fact, proof that any attempt at simplifying or sentimentalising governance in Nigeria only harms the country severely. We need to demand to know the source of this conviction he has, that he is worthy of being re-elected. We may indeed also ask ourselves how it is that a “former” military dictator can still show his face in public, enough to have a political party rally around him several times; enough to run for presidency! What does it say about the people? I cannot help but be wary about the number of reformed dictators and born-again democrats in Nigeria; perhaps, this one in particular would have succeeded in reassuring the doubters like myself, had he agreed to the numerous requests made to hear him speak at a public debate.

Over the next few days, democracy as we know it may win. However, I’m afraid that as with the shooting in Lekki, the countless incidents in Maiduguri, we may fail to confront yet another tragedy that concerns us all as a result of constructed lines of division – this time, political affiliation – if we do not begin to recognise the nature of our democracy as too often Politics of the Lesser Evil. I have put aside all thoughts of change being brought to us from the political industry; the industry as it stands more desperately needs this introduction of change. Whatever the outcome of the elections, what is important, necessary, is that we allow ourselves to start uncovering the subtle tragedies in our democracy by reflecting seriously, collectively, on our rights as citizens to  genuine

leadership. We must begin to ask the difficult questions. We must demand standards. Otherwise, how can we at the other end of society ever hope to matter?

We do not just carry on. We wait. We wonder how we got here, first.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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